

# PAINTING IN NORTHERN EUROPE 1450-1550

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## THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

The waning Middle Ages in northern Europe were marked by a violent and harsh daily life for most, rich pageantry for a few, a certain confusion and pessimism and above all by a profound and pervading religious fervor.

We know the appearance of this period (from 1450 to 1550 in France, Germany and The Netherlands) mostly through a few paintings left to us, a small selection of which are illustrated in this publication.

Unlike Italy, where the Renaissance came early and naturally through the inspiration of the antique which surrounded and permeated every aspect of life, northern Europe remained longer under the domination of medieval thought. Those visual aspects of classical art brought back from travel to Italy or through circulation of prints and books were often only a kind of superficial veneer to the essential realism and deep religious sentiment of northern art.

Of the northern European paintings which remain to us, most fall within two categories: portraits and religious subjects. A few rare landscapes survive but almost no scenes of daily life. However, from the meticulously realistic portraits we can

learn much about the general pessimism and confusion of the late Middle Ages (how serious and unsmiling they are!); about the sobriety of dress (although often bedecked with precious jewels). Unfortunately we have frequently lost names to attach to many of these portraits. How tantalizing not to be able to unravel the mystery of who are the subjects of the Mülich portraits even though they give us enigmatic clues in the small landscape backgrounds.

Originality was not a virtue in the Middle Ages and nowhere is this more apparent than in the religious altarpieces where the Church often dictated exact formulae for the subject matter. Even here, however, the artist can speak to us across the centuries and tell us much about his own time in the small scenes of daily life that he was permitted to add in miniature background landscapes (see cover).

All of the pictures discussed here are the gift of the Museum's founder Edward Drummond Libbey unless otherwise indicated.

Otto Wittmann, Director

Cover: *MASTER OF THE MORRISON TRIPTYCH* (active 1500-1510). Flemish. Detail from the central panel, *The Morrison Triptych*. (Full composition illustrated p. 34.)

Back cover: *HANS HOLBEIN*, detail, see p. 46.

# LATE GOTHIC AND RENAISSANCE PAINTING IN NORTHERN EUROPE

MORRISON TRIPTYCH, detail, see p. 34.



The 15th and 16th centuries in northern European art mark the gradual transition from the medieval vision of the world and afterworld to the Renaissance and the emergence of attitudes and events which form the basis of modern thought and history. Northern Europe was in the 15th century still largely medieval in its outlook. Life was regarded as a transitory phase leading to a happier beyond. Above the humblest dwellings and the palaces of nobles and kings towered the spires of the great Gothic cathedrals symbolizing the church's dominant influence in daily life and in government.

Northern Europe shed its medieval cloak much more gradually than did Italy where men lived with their classical past. The early Italian Renaissance painters and sculptors created works of art which embodied classical Greek and Roman ideals in appearance and attitude in the first quarter of the 15th century. At about the same time the greatest northern painters were still working in a Late Gothic manner and the innovations which they made, although not to be considered as lesser than their Italian contemporaries, were conceived within the context of Late Gothic forms. They created in their

small panel paintings a realistic space in which figures existed surrounded by light and atmosphere. The way in which the light played over forms, casting shadows, shining through drops of moisture on a flower, or making reflections of a building in a canal was as carefully observed as the appearance and textures of the objects themselves. This fascination with the natural, everyday appearance of things and the sensitivity to changes in the effects of light and atmosphere are especially characteristic of north European art, particularly in The Netherlands which took the lead in painting of the 15th century.

The tendency toward naturalism however was also associated with a wealth of medieval symbolic references. A botanically accurate representation of a vase containing a rose, violets, and a lily placed in an "Annunciation" scene had a hidden meaning, the rose denoting the charity of Mary, the violets her humility, and the lily her chastity. In addition, the settings themselves were Late Gothic in architectural form with pointed arches and turreted, fortress-like castles. The absolute solemnity and sacredness of the scenes represented by these artists is clear. Mary was the queen of Heaven. All aspects of an interior in which she sits may be realistically depicted, but the sacred, holy nature of the scene is also clear. This reverent attitude is best illustrated in the Museum's collection in the three panels by Gerard David representing The Miracles of St. Anthony.

The high point to which the Netherlandish painters developed these innovations in observation of the visible was accompanied by a necessary and important technical innovation. Until the early 15th century the colors in painting had appeared opaque because the binding medium used was egg tempera. It was found that by using oil as a binding medium, the colors were transparent and could be blended smoothly making three-dimensional effects more easy to achieve. Thin films or "glazes" of color could be laid one on top of the other to create resonant, jewel-like colors. The velvety quality of a red robe or of light shining through a crystal sphere could be accurately depicted. This perfection of oil paint is an innovation used by all subsequent ages of European painting.

In the early 16th century worldly, everyday features become even more apparent. For example, the panel representing Saints Catherine, Margaret and Barbara attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder shows the saints dressed as three ladies of the German nobility. In the St. Peter and St. Paul panels by Jan Gossaert, Italian Renaissance architectural forms derived from the classical past are intro-

duced. Figures appear to have a classical grandeur and weight. The Gothic grace, mystery, and striving is left behind in favor of a new, powerful sense of reality and concentration on man and his world.

The first northerner to appreciate and fully understand the innovations of the Italian Renaissance was the German artist, Albrecht Dürer. It was he who interpreted these ideas so powerfully in his prints which then made their way to other parts of northern Europe. It was, for example, through Dürer's prints that Jan Gossaert learned of Italian Renaissance forms. Awareness of Italian thought and art brought northern Europe out of its Gothic confines, but the northern artists did not entirely relinquish their traditional stylistic strengths. The monumental classicism of the Italian Renaissance was combined with the northerner's disposition to observation of natural phenomena. Such is the case, for example, in the figures of St. Peter and St. Paul by Jan Gossaert where a monumental setting and figures with a breadth of treatment reminiscent of Roman marble sculptures are combined with naturalistic observation of facial features and anatomy. This fusion of styles is also true of the portraits by Hans Holbein and Francois Clouet.

Various features of northern European late Gothic and Renaissance style may be seen in the works of art illustrated in the following pages. Germany, France, and The Netherlands are represented and the period covered is roughly 1450 to 1550.



JAN GOSSAERT, detail, see p. 32.

MASTER OF THE VISION OF ST. JOHN  
(active about 1450-1470). German  
(Cologne). *The Adoration of the Kings*.  
About 1450. Oil on panel. 51 x 28 inches.  
36.80.



The name of the author of this picture and a group of paintings which are stylistically similar is unknown. He is identified by a painting in Cologne called *The Vision of St. John*, thus the name, Master of the Vision of St. John.

The Gothic style, which persisted longer in German painting than it did in The Netherlands, is clearly evident here. The gold background gives an other-worldly, holy mood. It also tends to flat-

ten any sense of space. The scale and relationship of objects within the space is unclear and the figures seem to have no real weight or bulk beneath the deep folds of their rich robes. Combined with this precious, other-worldliness, however, are numerous carefully observed natural details so important to the north European artist: the plants in the foreground, the textures of the different fabrics and jewels, and the portrait-like faces of the three kings. Only the holy figures are idealized.



ANONYMOUS. French. *Saint George and the Dragon*. About 1490. Oil on panel.  $19\frac{1}{2} \times 14\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Ex-collections: Henri Haro, Paris; Otto H. Kahn, New York. 43.30.

This charming narrative picture was probably painted in northern France about 1490. Of the important artistic regions of France in the 15th century, northern France (Paris and Amiens) were particularly noted for the high quality of its illuminated manuscripts. This picture is greatly influenced by the traditions of such illuminations. Emphasis was placed upon elegant narration, gently expressed without excess emotion. The colors are light and sparkling but no natural light or atmosphere envelopes the figures. The figures seem to be out of scale with their setting, as was often the case in manuscript illustration.

Although the style of painting may be related to northern French illuminations of the period, the architecture of the two castles in the background can be closely identified with two castles still in existence, Beaucaire at the left and on the opposite bank of the Rhône River, Tarascon. Both buildings are in Provence in southern France.

The story of St. George and the Dragon is too well-known to repeat. St. George as a model of the chivalric ideal was very popular in art and literature throughout the 15th century.



HANS HOLBEIN the ELDER (1460/70-1524). German. Head of the Virgin from an Annunciation. About 1501. Oil on panel.  $17\frac{1}{4} \times 14\frac{3}{8}$  inches.  
Ex-collection: Prince Franz Joseph of Liechtenstein. 51.341.

The father of the better known Renaissance painter, Hans Holbein the Younger (see p. 46), Hans Holbein the Elder worked in the late gothic style of 15th century Germany and The Netherlands. The head of the Virgin is a fragment from a larger panel representing the Annunciation which formed part of a complex high altarpiece consisting of two sets of outer wings and a central group

of four scenes from the life of Mary. The altarpiece was completed in 1501 for the Dominican Church in Frankfurt am Main and is the largest work undertaken by Holbein the Elder. Other parts of the altarpiece are now located in museums in Frankfurt am Main, Basel, Hamburg, and in a private collection in London.



IAN GOSSAERT, known as MABUSE (1478-1535?). Two wings of an altarpiece: St. John. St. Peter. On reverse: The Annunciation. Signed and dated 1521. Oil on Panel. Each panel 47 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Ex-collections: Edward Solly, London; William II, King of The Netherlands. 52.85.

St. John the Baptist and St. Peter form two panels which once were the side wings of a triptych. On the reverse of these panels is the Annunciation. These wings flanked a central panel representing the *Descent from the Cross* now in the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad. The Annunciation, which would have been seen when the altarpiece was closed, is painted in grisaille, imitating the stone sculptures which decorated the portals of medieval churches. St. John the Baptist and St. Peter were painted in full color and were seen with the central

panel when the altar was opened. When the two side panels were separated from the central panel in the 19th century, they were slightly altered at the top.

An early 17th century document states that the altarpiece belonged to a Spanish family named Salamanca living in Bruges. A slightly later document tells us that the two saints are, in fact, portraits of their respective namesakes, Pedro de Salamanca (who lived in Bruges in the early 16th



century) and the artist, Jan Gossaert. The intense gaze of St. John as though the artist were studying himself in a mirror and the fact that the saint points emphatically down to the artist's signature support the fact that this is a self-portrait.

Gossaert employed a different style for each side of the panels: flamboyant Gothic for the outside and Renaissance for the inside. The Annunciation is framed by the lacy inter-twining ten-drils which form pedestals and pointed, Late Gothic

arches. St. John the Baptist and St. Peter, on the other hand, stand in somewhat fantastic Italian Renaissance arches with classicizing capitals, coffered ceilings. At the base are nude children more reminiscent of the infant Hercules than of angels. This simultaneous use of two different styles typifies the north European attempts to assimilate Italian Renaissance forms while at the same time maintaining strong ties with the Gothic past.



MASTER OF THE MORRISON TRIPTYCH (active 1500-1510). Flemish. *The Virgin and Child with Angels; St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist*. Oil on panel. Central panel: 38 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches; wings: 43 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 14 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches. Ex-collection: John Morrison, Wiltshire, England. 54.5

The artistic personality of the author of this work was first identified in 1915 by Max J. Friedländer, the great German art authority, but scholars have never certainly known his name. Friedländer used this triptych as the keystone for a group of paintings which he attributed to this anonymous artist calling him the Master of the Morrison Triptych after this work when it was in the collection of John Morrison of Wiltshire, England. At the same time Friedländer suggested that a Dutch artist who settled in Antwerp named "Simon van Herlem" (of Haarlem) might be identical with the Morrison Master.

A triptych is a three-part work of art consisting of a central picture flanked by two "wings" which could be folded to cover the central panel. Commonly used over altars or on the walls of churches or chapels the subject matter was usually religious. The outer face of the wings which would be seen when the triptych was closed were usually painted to conform to the traditional stone architecture against which they would be seen, and were often, as here, painted to look like sculpture. The inner part was designed to reveal a colorful and moving religious subject in which the wings were usually related to the central panel. This devotional ele-



MASTER OF THE MORRISON TRIPTYCH (active 1500-1510). Flemish. Adam and Eve. Oil on panel. Outer face of wings: 43 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches. 54.5.



ment was only revealed at special times of religious observance.

As such religious compositions were usually dictated by the Church there was little opportunity for artistic freedom as we think of it today. Compositions were repeated almost verbatim according to firm conventions. So in the case of this triptych, the composition is almost the same as that of a famous earlier triptych by Hans Memling now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. However, the Morrison Master's own personality is evident in several variations from the earlier triptych. He replaces a donor in the earlier picture with the

lovely lute-playing angel to the right of the Virgin. He uses his own beautiful sense of color to establish an unusual relationship of muted tonalities throughout. He introduces his own additional everyday scenes in the background of the central panel, his sculptured figures are more playful, his architecture more fanciful, his Madonna and saints more gentle and less regal. All these individual elements establish a separate, very real personality of great charm to which even today we can attach no other name than the Master of the Morrison Triptych.



GERARD DAVID (about 1460-1523). Flemish. *Three Miracles*. The Mule Kneeling before the Host. St. Anthony Preaching to the People. About 1499-1511. Oil on panel. Ex-collections: Cardinal Antonio Montenegro, Roxa, Mallorca; Leon Somzée, Brussels; Want...

These three panels relating the miracles of St. Anthony once formed part of an altarpiece consisting of three large central panels (now in the National Gallery, Washington) and six smaller panels. Three of the smaller panels representing scenes from the life of St. Nicholas (now in Edinburgh, Scotland) formed the counterpart to the St. Anthony panels while the three large central panels represent St. Nicholas and St. Anthony flanking the Virgin and Child with St. Anne.

Gerard David was the last great master of Bruges, continuing the tradition of Late Gothic Netherlandish painting begun by Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Hugo van der Goes, and Hans Memling. Although the center of Netherlandish painting moved from Bruges to Antwerp during his lifetime, David maintained his predecessors' grave, devout moods and continued to describe the subtle effects of light and atmosphere. The cool, finely modulated colors, accurate



St. Anthony of Padua: *The Drowned Child Restored to Life.*  
*The Fishes.* Each panel approximately  $21\frac{1}{8} \times 12\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
 Don Despuig y Daneto, Archbishop of Valencia; Counts of  
 Collection, Berkshire, England. 59.21-23.

naturalism of details, the solidity and grandeur of the figures are characteristic of David's style.

David shows his ability as a narrator in the St. Anthony panels. The first panel shows St. Anthony reviving a drowned child who rises from the water in the presence of his parents and a town magistrate holding his staff of office. In the second panel, St. Anthony compels a mule belonging to a heretic to kneel before the Host. The heretic,

Bouadilla, is converted as he points to the miraculous event. In the third panel, as St. Anthony preaches, the fish hearing his words, rise high out of the water. In the background men (represented as Flemish burghers) who had doubted St. Anthony's preaching, become convinced while a few still remain skeptical. The miraculous events, presented with a gentle and naive sensitivity, all take place in the setting of Flemish 15th century life.



CORNELIS MASSYS (about 1510-1560). Flemish. *The Judgment of Paris*. About 1545. Oil on panel.  
12 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 17 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches. 35.57.

Until the 16th century, beautifully detailed northern European landscape painting had been confined to the background of religious subjects. In the 16th century, certain artists including Joachim Patinir and his follower, Cornelis Massys, allowed landscape to become an important element although a subject, in this case the Judgment of Paris, was still a necessary inclusion. The subject however is small and incidental, a footnote to the romantic and craggy landscape which held a far greater fascination for the artist.

Joos van Cleve was a prolific painter of portraits of the Antwerp bourgeois and lesser nobility. Details of costume and appearance have been observed in the best Flemish tradition, but there is little real definition of personality. The coins held by the man may refer to the transience of earthly wealth as opposed to faith in Christ as represented by the rosary held by his wife. A coat of arms on the reverse of the portrait of the man may identify the couple as members of the Hanneman family. The portraits may represent Nicarius (Nicasin) Hanneman and his wife Maria Duyk van Hoogstraten.



Jacob Cornelisz, also known as Jacob van Amsterdam, was the most important artist in Amsterdam in the first third of the 16th century. This forthright self-portrait reveals the artist as a keen observer and a conscientious craftsman. The artist and his wife are presented as simple people. The unflattering somewhat awkward presentation forecasts Dutch 17th century painting with its lack of flourish and pretence.

JACOB CORNELISZ VAN OOSTSAANEN (about 1470-1533). Dutch. *The Artist with a Portrait of His Wife*. About 1530. Oil on panel.  $24\frac{1}{16}$  x  $19\frac{1}{16}$  inches. 60.7.



JOOS VAN CLEVE (about 1485-1540). Flemish. *Pair of portraits of a Young Man and Woman*. About 1530. Oil on panel.  $16\frac{5}{8}$  x  $13\frac{3}{8}$  inches.  
Ex-collections: First Earl of Ellenborough, England. 26.59 and 26.62.



LUCAS CRANACH the ELDER  
(1472-1553). German. *Martin Luther and the Wittenberg Reformers*. About 1530. Oil on panel.  $27\frac{5}{8} \times 15\frac{5}{8}$  inches.  
Ex-collections: Cornelia, Countess of Craven, Warwickshire.

The persons represented have been identified as (left to right): Martin Luther, Georg Spalatin, Prince Elector Johann Friedrich of Saxony, Chancellor Georg Brüch (or possibly Andreas Ossiander), Johann Brugenhagen, and Phillip Melanchthon. The five figures behind have not been clearly identified.

Lucas Cranach the Elder was painter to the Electors of Saxony. Best known as the painter of the Reformation in Protestant Germany, he was very close to Martin Luther and the Wittenberg

reformers. In addition to being a painter, he was a personality of wealth and position in Wittenberg where he was city councilor, chamberlain, and finally, burgomaster. His severe, stylized execution, use of flat areas of color, which emphasize sinuous silhouettes characterize his style. As court painter, Cranach employed a large workshop of assistants and apprentices, much as a fashionable photographer would today. Most paintings, including this, which are for convenience attributed to Cranach, can only with certainty be attributed to his workshop or studio.

LUCAS CRANACH the ELDER (1472-1553). German.  
St. Catherine, St. Margaret, and St. Barbara.  
About 1515-1520. Oil on panel. 48½ x 22 inches.  
Ex-collection: Prince Ernest of Saxony. 61.32.



The three saints are presented as three elegant ladies of the German 16th century nobility. Only their attributes inform us of their saintly status. The influence of Renaissance Italy is seen in the architecture, its decoration, and in the two putti who hold the curtain. This panel once may have been one part of a larger altarpiece.



HANS MUELICH (1516-1573). German. *Portrait of a Man*.  
Monogrammed and dated 1540. Oil on panel. 29½ x 23½ inches.  
55.226.

This pair of portraits of an unidentified couple exemplifies German Renaissance humanist portraiture at its best. The half-length figures fill the picture space with breadth and assurance. There is confidence and dignity in these representations. In comparison, the earlier portraits by Joos van Cleve (pp. 38-39) are confined and restrained, and there is relatively little characterization of personality.

In the later more open and assured portraits by Muelich, the landscape views behind lend support to the characterization of the husband and wife. The city with its dominant cathedral seen behind the man, embodies his interests while the moody, mountainous landscape with its dominant castle and sunset sky is reflective of the temperament of the woman. Although the church has not been identified, it may be one with which the man had



HANS MUELICH (1516-1573). German. *Portrait of a Woman*.  
Monogrammed and dated 1540. Oil on panel. 29½ x 25⅜ inches.  
55.227.

a special affiliation. In the foreground of this landscape is a representation of the martyrdom of St. Stephen. This may symbolically refer to his name or to some aspect of the man's life. Similarly, the castle behind the woman may be a specific geographic reference to her domestic life or to her origin.

Stylistically related to the "Danube School", a group of landscape painters working in Austria, these landscapes display a new feeling for the expressive, romantic qualities of nature. Such representations of the cosmic vastness, the exuberant growth, and the variety of nature showed that nature was an embodiment of God.



CORNEILLE de LYON. (1505?-1574?). French.  
*Portrait of a Man.* About 1525. Oil on panel.  
12 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Ex-collection: Count Montbrizon,  
Montauban. 38.25.

Corneille de Lyon worked for the French Court and was painter to Henry II and his successors. His small, miniature-like portraits reveal his Dutch origin in the sensitive, naturalistic modelling and the direct, unpretentious presentation. The smooth, enamel-like technique built up of thin glazes of oil paint is in the tradition of Jan van Eyck. It is possible that this artist worked within the Flemish tradition, studying under Joos van Cleve in Antwerp and settling later in Lyons. Since no signed or documented works by Corneille de Lyon

are known, a group of works can only be attributed to him and to the circle of artists working in his manner. His name therefore represents a style rather than a specific individual.

This portrait has been traditionally known as a portrait of the Maréchal Bonnivet, but its relationship to a drawing of Bonnivet by Clouet at Chantilly bears a period similarity rather than an individual identity.



FRANCOIS CLOUET (1516?-1572). French. *Elizabeth of Valois*. 1558 or 1559. Oil on panel. 14 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches. Ex-collections: Lord Northwick, Cheltenham; Count de Lonyay, Nagy-Lonya, Czechoslovakia. 29.140.

Elizabeth of Valois was the daughter of Henri II and Catherine de Medici and was the sister of three French kings: Francois II, Charles IX, and Henri III. In 1559, she became Queen of Spain through her marriage to Phillip II. This portrait was executed when she was about thirteen years old, probably a year before her marriage by proxy in Notre Dame, Paris, to the Spanish monarch. They met later at the Spanish border.

Francois Clouet succeeded his father, Jean Clouet, as painter to Francois I and was court painter to the three subsequent French kings. His severe, dry style reveals the influence of Italian Mannerist painting. Much French painting of this period was oriented towards Italian painting, but in the case of Clouet this influence is infused with a northern European restraint and attention to naturalistic detail.

HANS HOLBEIN the YOUNGER (1497-1543). German. Catherine Howard. About 1540. Oil on panel. 28 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches.  
Ex-collections: Cromwell Bush, London; James H. Dunn, Canada; Edward Drummond Libbey. 26.57.



Hans Holbein, court painter to Henry VIII, settled permanently in England in 1532 after a successful earlier career in Basel. His portraits are among the most incisive, most sensitive elements of visual history left to us. They are also among the most significant north Renaissance works of art ever produced.

Among the finest examples of Holbein's paintings in America is this portrait thought since the late 19th century to be of Catherine Howard, fifth wife of Henry VIII. Recently, Roy Strong, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, London, in his authoritative book on Tudor and Jacobean Por-

traits has convincingly suggested that this portrait (together with several other versions of the same subject) represents a lady of the Cromwell family. Possibly the subject may be Elizabeth Seymour, daughter-in-law of Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex, according to Strong. In addition to painting, Holbein designed metalwork, jewelry and state robes for King Henry VIII and his entourage. We know that the pendant at this lady's neck was designed by Holbein since his drawing for it exists in the British Museum, London. Lot and his family led away from the destruction of Sodom by an angel are depicted on it.

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